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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTIONS OF: RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

Written statement*/ submitted by the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[4 December 2000]

*/ This written statement is issued, unedited, as received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Civil and Political Rights including questions of Religious Intolerance

1. The issue of Religious Freedom and Liberty has been important to the World Council of Churches and its member churches since the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement early in the twentieth century. Art. 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is based on the statement on religious freedom adopted by the First WCC Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 on the eve of the Paris meeting of the General Assembly. The subject of Religious Freedom and Liberty and Religious Intolerance has been addressed by the WCC ever since in declarations, statements, reports, and actions on specific situations.

2. Ecumenical thinking on the concept of religious liberty has progressively evolved in light of the concrete experiences of member churches around the world in vastly different environments. Over the years churches have realised that religious liberty cannot be divorced from other aspects of human rights and the Church cannot seek protection for its own rights isolated from a concern of all rights for all people. The WCC Executive Committee issued a statement in 1979 noting *"that Christians have to be concerned about more than their own religious liberty. Their concern must extend to the defence of human rights and liberty of all – whether they profess other religions or no religion."* This approach, the WCC believes, allows societies in a pluralistic world to progress toward common expressions and affirmation of the dignity and freedom of all human beings. To achieve this goal constant efforts have to be made to clarify and concretise different understandings of human rights and religious freedom in specific social and political contexts, so that gradually a common understanding becomes acceptable in all countries.

3. The recent rise of incidences of religious intolerance undermines the basic principle of freedom of religion and belief. This negative trend has disrupted and often destroyed inter-religious harmony and should receive priority attention by all world religions. Disruption of inter-communal harmony is on the increase in countries where communal and national aspirations are framed more in religious than in secular terms, creating a propitious environment for religious revival of a type that causes friction between dominant religious forces and minority religions. In analysing the rise in religious intolerance and violence the WCC has concluded that while many of the problems encountered are rooted in history, most are aggravated by insecure governments and political movements that resort to the use of religion to promote their narrow interests. Weak governments often tend to view religion and religious activities as a threat or a source of destabilisation and therefore seek to regulate or control activities of religious organisations. Sometimes governments take discriminatory measures to increase their popularity amongst certain sectors of society.

4. Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief is denied or under threat today in many parts of the world. In the post cold war reordering of societies and their international relations, religious and social institutions that were previously unifying forces enabling people to be confident and secure in their identities and in their relations with others have been seriously weakened. In many places there are realities or perceptions of invasion by external economic, political or religious forces that threaten the established religious and social order. There, religions and religious forces often tend to become sectarian, defensive and aggressive in their assertion of narrow, religious or ethnic interests. Religious fundamentalism is now a common response to foreign domination and social marginalisation, especially in countries of the Global South. In the North there is a trend in some countries to blacklist disfavoured groups, to create information centres focused on

minority religious groups, and to enact laws that hinder religious liberty particularly of minority groups. All these measures have contributed to the growing environment of religious intolerance.

5. During last year the WCC has worked particularly closely with its members churches in situations of conflicts with significant religious dimensions in different regions of the world. It accompanied these churches through consultations, visitations, and providing relief and humanitarian assistance to victims of inter-religious conflicts irrespective of their religious affiliation. Based on this experience and the reports received, the WCC draws the attention of the UN Commission on Human Rights and of the Special Rapporteur on the question of religious intolerance to the following factors that have contributed to the growing environment of religious intolerance:

(a) During the last fifteen years religion has moved more and more to the centre of public life. It is now a dominant factor in civil and political life of many countries. Some people see it as a threat, while others have welcomed the return of religion to the centre of national life.

(b) Religion has come to play a significant role in contemporary conflicts and violence that have contributed to grave and serious human rights violations, but religion is seldom the cause of conflict. The root causes of most contemporary conflicts are to be found in the inequitable distribution of economic resources and denial of political power sharing in governance.

(c) However religion is more and more frequently used as tool and a catalyst in the escalation of these conflicts. Religious symbols and idioms are often manipulated by political forces to promote their self-interests, thereby bringing the negative aspects of religion to the fore.

(d) Religious minorities caught in conflict situations often look outside for assistance. This appeal for intervention often stirs nationalist sentiments in the country thereby further alienating and isolating minorities and leading to further division and polarisation.

(e) Places of worship are increasingly used as platforms for political activity and for promotion of particular religio-political viewpoint. They are used to mobilise people through incitement and promotion of religious hatred and violence.

(f) Typical of such conflicts today is the use of outside financial resources and personnel to fuel the fires of religious intolerance and violence.

(g) In situations where there is an Islamic majority, the fear of the application of Sharia'h laws to religious minorities constitutes a major source of tension and conflict. The application of Sharia'h is often seen by non-Muslim religious minorities as discriminatory and a violation of the fundamental human rights of the minorities as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other internationally accepted norms and standards.

The WCC firmly believes that the best way to overcome the present growing environment of religious intolerance and violence is through the vigorous promotion of inter-religious

dialogue at international and especially at community levels. Such a dialogue should be promoted by both governments and religious groups through education and awareness-building programmes where members of communities are taught to respect each other's religion and culture and to make a commitment to observe the rule of law, to respect democratic values and to promote good governance. To this end, the WCC has for many years engaged in inter-religious dialogue and cooperation, and in efforts to build awareness among the churches of its importance at all levels of society. It seeks to promote joint efforts with other faith communities and concrete inter-actions in community life, especially in multi-religious societies. It meets often with governments and ministries of religious affairs for dialogue on the development and application of constitutional protections on religious freedom, and has in some cases assisted officials to visit other countries for dialogue with their peers and with leaders of religious communities committed to religious tolerance, mutual respect and inter-religious cooperation.

In his recent address to the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, Dr. Konrad Raiser, WCC General Secretary said:

> We gather here … at a time when many millions of our sisters and brothers hunger and thirst for righteousness, for justice, for peace. We have come as those who bear responsibility for keeping alive hope for the least of these, our sisters and brothers. In an age of the cynical use of power, we come as religious leaders to assert the truth that it is God who reigns over all for the good of the whole Creation and those who dwell in it.
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> We meet in a time of great transition from an age of secularism which tended to despise religion. Today, peoples around the world are looking again to religion as a source of spiritual values which transcend earthly power. In religion people are finding new sources of community bonds, of human solidarity, of hope for a better future
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> All true religion wills justice, peace and harmony. Yet, as we engage here in dialogue we are conscious of the fact that wars are being fought in many parts of the world appealing to the name of religion. Our own religious communities are being divided along lines of competing doctrines or as a result of alliances between religions and national, ethnic and other secular groupings which have assumed a "holy" character. As was the case in the age of secularism, religion continues to be misused by those controlling power whose interests have little to do with religion, faith or the spirituality of believers.
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> Dialogue within and between religions requires not just tolerance but deep respect for the other in his or her authentic relationship with the Holy. True dialogue should enable each partner to deepen his or her own faith or belief, not to weaken or abandon it. We seek not an amalgam of spiritual truths, some sort of global set of minimum religious values or a shared code of behavior comprised of eternal truths drawn from our various faiths. Rather we seek ways to create a global culture of mutual respect which will provide a model to those who bear responsibility for governance at all levels of society, be it in the private, communal or public spheres.
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> Most of us will agree, I think, that the spirit of secularism which either sought to abolish religion, or to restrict it to the sphere of personal spirituality has contributed to

> a breakdown in both public and private morality. But as religious and spiritual leaders we should be honest with ourselves and with the world and therefore admit that we have too often remained silent in the face of this breakdown in ethics and morality. Some of our own institutions have at times been complicit with or have even succumbed themselves to such abuses of public trust and responsibility to God. ...
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> The last Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held in Harare, Zimbabwe, declared an ecumenical "Decade to Overcome Violence." ... It is based on our conviction that dialogue today must have at its center the overcoming of violence in our world and the creation of a global culture of peace.
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> The dimensions of this task are manifold, and in all of them religions have a crucial role to play together. Nowhere, however, is our concerted effort more urgently needed as in the address to international and internal conflicts in which religions are involved, or that are being fought in the name of religion. It is my sincere prayer and hope that in the dialogue we shall pursue in these days, and in close collaboration with the United Nations, we can strengthen the commitment to a culture of peace and in particular deny the sanction of religion to those who seek to make it a tool of violence.

In this spirit, the WCC encourages the Commission and the Special Rapporteur in their efforts to safeguard and promote religious freedom, especially for religious minorities, and assures them of its cooperation and support in building trust and a global climate of religious tolerance, peace and non-violence.